

PLAYING CARDS FROM JAPAN.

BY

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(With plate XXXII.)

The history of playing cards, their introduction into Europe from the East by the gypsies or by the home-returning crusaders, the change and development they underwent, while being adapted, from the cards of the Orient and altered into those that are familiar to our eyes, has been dwelt upon by numbers of writers; but the cards used in Japan have not been mentioned in any of the best known histories, although they are more distinctly original than any others, and they show no marks of the common origin which the Italian, Spanish, German, French, Hindoo, and Chinese cards display.

The Japanese cards are oblong, and are made of pasteboard; the backs are painted black, with none of the checkered dotted marks which usually decorate European cards. The designs seem to be stenciled, and are brightly and appropriately colored, and then covered with an enamel or varnish, which makes them quite as slippery as our own. They are very much smaller than our cards, being a little more than 2 inches long by 1 inch broad.

Forty-nine in number, they are divided into twelve suits of four cards in each suit. One card is a trifle smaller than the rest of the pack, and has a plain white face not embellished with any distinctive emblem, and this one is used as a "joker." The other cards are covered with designs that represent that twelve flowers or other things appropriate to the weeks of the year. Each card is distinct and different from its fellows, even if bearing the same emblem, and they can be easily distinguished and classified, not only by the symbolic flowers they bear, but also by a character or letter that marks nearly every card, and which seems to denote the vegetable that represents the month. The only month that has no floral emblem is August, and that suit is marked by mountains and warm-looking skies.

January is represented by pine trees, that, on two of the cards, are shown against a lurid sky; the third one has a grayish background, that throws the trees into strong relief, and the fourth has a setting sun flecked with light clouds, the pines barely indicated in front of it, and the greater part of the card covered with the figure of a huge white bodied, red-eyed, stork.

February displays, as its emblem, a plum blossom; the four cards devoted to this month bearing its flower in various positions.

March has a red cherry blossom, and April the hanging tendrils of the wistaria vine. On one of the cards of this suit is a wee yellow-bird, which is flying across its surface under a crimson cloud.

For May there are beautiful blue Iris springing from long spiky leaves. One card shows in one of its corners part of a dock or pier, and also the water out of which the flower is lifting its lovely head.

June is represented by blood-red peonies, over one of which two yellow butterflies are hovering.

On July's cards star-shaped leaves, some yellow, some red, and some black, are scattered over their surfaces. These leaves resemble those of our "Gum" or "Liquid amber" trees, but they bear the Japanese name of Hägi. On one of the cards belonging to this suit a deer is represented standing under the branches of this strangely-hued tree. This is the only figure which recalls in anyway the emblems used on cards belonging to other nations, as on one of the Chinese cards is found either a deer or else Chinese characters which have been translated to mean "This is a deer."

August is represented by four pictures of grass-covered mountains, in three of which they are sharply defined against a clouded blue sky, and in the fourth the sun, looking hot and sultry, beams down on a treeless hill. Three birds fly across the sky on one of these cards.

September bears the Mikado's flower, a yellow and red chrysanthemum. October, a maple tree with red or yellow leaves; and on one card is a yellow boar trotting off towards the symbolic tree.

November shows on one of its cards a willow sharply outlined against a leaden sky. The willows on a fellow-card look wind-tossed, and a long-tailed bird skims across the sky. A third card is covered with inky clouds, torrents of rain, and strange zigzags resembling forked lightning. The fourth card of this suit bears a quaint figure of a man rushing through the storm under the willow trees and dropping his sandals in his haste, his head covered with a huge yellow umbrella; streaks of lightning surround the little figure, and the storm of rain is well depicted in the picture.

December bears the imperial Japanese plant kiri, and over one of these flowers hovers a beautiful red-crested silver-winged pheasant.

An infinite variety of games are played with these cards, as there is a shade of difference in each one of each set, and in some games each has a separate value. The favorite game in Japan at the present moment is very like casino, in which any card of a set may take any other, but all have their own values in the final count.